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ABSTRACT

The offshoots of women's studies programs, such as cultural diversity, men's studies, and African-American studies, are now viewed as being at odds with women's studies although they share the same goal of transforming the curriculum. Most notable among these is men's studies and its relationship to women's studies. The challenge for teachers is to achieve a synthesis to afford students the best possible education without diluting the original women's studies courses and their activist orientation. A "Women in Literature" course at New Jersey's Raritan Valley Community College has always been inclusive in scope, but also helps students understand the interconnectedness of women's, men's, and other issues. In fall 1996, the 24 students in the course were surveyed regarding their satisfaction with and opinions on course content and title. All of the 22 responding students thought that the word "women" should remain in the title, while students also thought that the course should continue to provide a synthesis of ideas. Strategies for achieving unity between women's and men's studies in the course included dividing the course into two parts dealing with the history of the women's movement and its recent application, including the men's movement; organizing the course by period; and leaving the course undivided, but changing its description to indicate that other issues, such as men and race, are discussed. Contains 20 references. (BCY)

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# The Coming of Age of Women's Studies: Attention Must be Paid

Lynne M. DeCicco

Issues of Education at Community Colleges: Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University

JC 970 404

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**The Coming of Age of Women's Studies:**
**Attention Must be Paid**

**Lynne M. DeCicco**
**Raritan Valley Community College**

* * * *

> Perhaps women were once so dangerous
> that they had to have their feet bound.
> --Maxine Hong Kingston
> --The Woman Warrior[1]

> If we insist on discovering something we
> can clearly label as a 'feminine mode,' then
> we are honor-bound, also, to delineate its
> counterpart, the 'masculine mode.'
> --Annette Kolodny
> --"Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist
> Literary Criticism' "[2]

> The question is not how we are to be men.
> Rather, the fundamental violation and violence
> done to all of us lies in the notion that men
> must be masculine, that masculinity is a goal
> to be attained.
> --Harry Brod
> --"The Politics of the Mythopoetic
> Men's Movement"[3]

--Overview

These quotations underscore vivid, contrasting, and, curiously, overlapping views in the critical landscape known as women's studies and its emerging literary cousin, the men's movement. The first highlights the inherent "dangerousness" of

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[1]Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior (NY: Vintage, 1975).

[2]Annette Kolodny, "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism,'" Critical Inquiry 2 (Autumn 1975): 78.

[3]Harry Brod, "The Politics of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement," The Politics of Manhood: Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

women, an early sensibility emanating from the women's movement grounded at the 60s: the notion that women were victims needing to be silenced, that they were the enemy, that they required guidance and "binding." Literary study illustrated how women were essentially misunderstood, and masculinity, when touched upon at all, was viewed through the lens of patriarchal tenets, among them condescension, control, exploitation, and power.

The second quotation promotes a fair approach towards understanding, an inspired outgrowth of the mid-70s criticism that sought to highlight connection between the sexes. If we are to understand women, it was felt, we must by rights recognize the need to address male needs and concerns as well. All of what we term "masculine" cannot be thrown into one pile; as with women's studies, there exist vast differences in masculine approaches to literary study, to culture, to authority, and to sexuality. This thinking encouraged a parallel approach to teaching, affording students the opportunity to appreciate opposing viewpoints of the gender issue.

The final and most recent quotation comes from a staunch profeminist within the current men's movement; he clarifies the sense that this movement cannot purport to speak for all men, that all men do not define masculinity the same way or that all men even wish to be "masculine" in a traditional sense.

--<u>The Problem with competing "studies"</u>

It is this last notion that forms the basis for this discussion, solidifying a growing awareness that women's studies is

the unfortunate victim of its own success. The offshoots--cultural diversity, men's studies, African-American studies--are part of the very essence of what women's studies was attempting to do in the early 60s: transform the curriculum, in order to provide an alternative approach to literary studies. All of these varying perspectives are often viewed as being at odds with one another, particularly, men's studies and its relaticnship to women's studies.

The problem is, how do we achieve a synthesis to afford students the best possible education without simplifying or diluting the original courses designed to study women's issues? There is a definite validation of history that cannot be overlooked: the women's movement in its infancy was an activist movement that students need to understand. In conjunction with this historical underpinning, there needs to be unity among the varying studies.

What is at issue is what many feminists call "the challenge of gender studies" where "to talk about women or certainly to advertise the fact that this is what one is doing now appears to have become somewhat controversial and less acceptable."[4] In their chapter, "Facing the 1990s: Problems and Possibilities for Women's Studies," Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard crystallize why the

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[4]Mary Evans, "The Problem of Gender for Women's Studies" Out of the Margins, ed. Jane Aaron and Sylvia Walby (London: Falmer, 1991). See also, Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments (California: University of California Press, 1987) and "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" Signs (12) 1990; David Ford and Jeff Hearn, Studying Men and Masculinity (Bradford: University of Bradford, 1988.)

men's movement took hold:

> A further development of concern here is the increasing interest in the study of masculinity and the development of men's studies. The argument for such work is that, although it is the case that men, historically, have been the main subjects of academic research and discussion (and indeed this was the very reason for the development of Women's Studies), it was men in a genderless sense who were being given less attention. There was little direct focus on the social construction of 'men.' It was as if the nature of manhood and the qualities associated with this were irrelevant to understanding the social world. It has been argued, therefore, that in focusing on men, researchers are giving due regard to an area of study which is long overdue (153).[5]

Perhaps long overdue, but there has to be a way to address the literary and social construction of masculinity without diminishing all of the study devoted to women that is still valid. The men's movement cannot be seen apart from women's lives, values and goals: "The feminist approach is the only one which will allow not only for the articulation of difference between the sexes, but for an acknowledgement that difference also involves inequality. This is because the Women's Studies perspective is attuned to difference in terms of inequality with regard, for example, to resources,

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[5] Women's Studies in the 1990s, ed. Joanna deGroot and Mary Maynard (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

legitimacy and authority" (de Groot and Maynard, 173).

-"Women in Literature" at Raritan Valley

In terms of "Women in Literature" a course I developed and have now taught at Raritan Valley for over twelve years (having refined the syllabus many times over that period), I have always seen a need to be inclusive. I do not wish to see a gradual diminishment or the watering-down of this course, nor even the substitution of "women" in the title for a more generic word, less woman-centered. As I have already demonstrated, students need to see linkages of gender through an introduction to what is possible right in their own community. The service-learning project that is now an ongoing component of "Women in Literature" affords an application of theoretical concerns with real people; it strengthens the correlation between academia and community service, which is certainly one mission of the community college.[6]

Even well before service-learning became an educational avenue, when I first taught as a preceptor in graduate school it seemed natural for me to include discussions of women and men on all my syllabi, even those courses that were not primarily about literature. Some of the best critical scholarship was being addressed in my own field (the Victorian novel) by feminist scholars where attitudes towards silence, audience and a female subtext offered new perspectives on traditional texts. Expanding beyond my own field, I discovered that women's issues could be

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[6]See my article "Service Learning Project Enlarges Scope of 'Women in Literature' " Innovations in Teaching (November, 1995) Raritan Valley Community College, Appendix 1.

examined in other courses as well: In a composition class, what better way to explore the notions of finding a voice, of paving the way towards confidence in one's ability to write an effective essay than to look at pieces focusing on just that issue of voice, audience, and identity (i.e., Virginia Woolf's ground-breaking "A Room of One's Own" or Judith Siefers's "I Want a Wife"). In an introduction to literature course, what better way to address how to interpret theme and underlying motivation than to read works by and about women who were themselves consistently misinterpreted, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper or Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes were Watching God. What is perhaps most ironic here is that I explored the problematics of male identity long before the movement vocalized its concerns. In a survey of world literature, what better way to expand further on women's issues, including notions of marginalization and victimization, than to re-examine classic male texts, such as the parallel male and female motifs at work in The Odyssey or The Epic of Gilgamesh. What I am saying is the integration of gender concerns, of race, and of ethnicity was something I always tried to embrace and rather took for granted. It is troubling to perceive an obvious resistance to this notion.

"Attention must be paid" - Solutions

Educators need to recognize that these varied strands of discourse ought to form a coalition. This collaborative effort is especially pertinent to the community college student population of the 90s and into the next century, where the interconnectedness of

the work force, the pragmatic needs of the family, technology, and education is clearly evident. Just as these interrelations have transformed the traditional boundaries of work and home, classroom and cyberspace, family and care providers, so too must students comprehend the connections among and between women's studies and other approaches. We need to embrace fluidity, not promote bifurcation, or, to put it differently, we need to offer the complexities among and between what the poet Audre Lourde terms "interwoven oppressions."[7]

Attention must be paid to a dangerous polarization of studies; rather than rejecting women's studies, the two ought to work in tandem. It seems more meaningful to examine men and women together: if women are still oppressed, let's examine the oppressor; if men feel overwhelmed by rigid masculine definitions, let's explore who is doing the defining and at whose expense; if men feel more at ease recognizing a sensitive, nurturing side to their manhood, let's follow through with it to achieve a greater sense of purpose and commitment. They can and should work together for a mutually attainable goal, as Lois W. Banner asserts:

> I have come to realize that a feminist analysis can be applied to the situation of men as well as to that of

[7]Indeed, as deGroot and Maynard point out, "the challenge of diversity points to the fact that women's lives are structured, mediated, and experienced through a variety of oppressive forces" including, they make clear "exercising power and privilege over other women. Thus, although all women may be oppressed, they do not share a common oppression" (152). This idea raises important problems for women's studies and course development because it highlights the inaccuracy imbedded in the concept of "woman" as one universal category.

> women. Patriarchy has been harmful to men. As much as the academic disciplines have overlooked women or trivialized them, they have also applied rigid behavioral categories to men. If substantial gender change is to occur, men as well as women must be reached (144).[8]

--Student Questionnaire - "Women in Literature"

I questioned students on some of these issues with a questionnaire during Fall, 1996 (Appendix 2; 24 in the class, 22 responding). Everyone felt the course title, "Women in Literature" should stay as is; even changing to "Gender and Literature" would, as one student phrased it, "seriously dilute the representative nature of the title." Under Question 4, students were most vocal about providing a synthesis of ideas under the main rubric of the course. A typical response was, "It's hard to separate women from race, men, culture, and class because it is so much a part of who they are and how they are defined. How can we discuss Sula [Toni Morrison] without race, class and culture?" This is a valid point that was eloquently raised many times: women's lives are interwoven with all the other oppressive concerns that underlie literary study.

--Student proposals for achieving unity

In responding to the final question, students also offered thoughtful commentary on the ways a synthesis could be achieved:

(1) Divide the current course "Women in Literature" into two

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[8]"Women's Studies and Men's Studies: An Alternative Approach" Women's Studies Forum (Vol. 9, No. 2) 1986: 141-144.

separate courses that parallel one another thematically. "Women in Literature I" ought to focus on early history, theory, and the forerunners of feminist thought and applications to literature. "Women in Literature II" could focus on applications that interconnect in the wave of recent academic ventures, embracing race, ethnicity, and the men's movement. Although each could be taken independently, the first course would complement and lead naturally into the second. Arguments that support this framework tend to feel that a firm basis of the historical and critical underpinnings of women's studies needs to be established first before applying ideas to other types of studies. Students were generous in their willingness to see other viewpoints: "To understand women we also need to understand what motivates men--we are in the world together. I'd like to study more about why men are compelled to dominate and wield power and control." Clearly, organizing the course in this fashion would allow more discussions of this nature to occur.

(2) Organize the course by period, placing each work in the context of its time period in terms of race, ethnicity, and/or men's studies, but make the works by and about women in keeping with the course. As one student wrote, "I would like to see it (the course) by period similar to American Literature or World Literature I and II, i.e., pre-Civil War, post-Civil War, or Enlightenment, post-18th Century. It's important to see the evolution of <u>women</u> in "Women in Literature." This chronological approach would afford students a chance to build a women's studies

timeline, so to speak, which is appealing. "Women in Literature--Antiquity to the Enlightenment" for example, could be followed by "Women in Literature--Eighteenth Century to the Modern Era." The course could offer diverse approaches to key literary women's texts, from an historical perspective, including issues relating to race, gender, and ethnicity.

(3) The final response was that "Women in Literature" does not require division. Of the 22 responses received, twelve students felt all issues were entertwined in a schema that afforded ample opportunity to see differing issues: "If the course were to be broken down, I think it would lose some of its balance," wrote one student. Of these twelve, two indicated that the course description should be rewritten to ensure that students understand "that other issues (such as men and race) are also discussed in the class."

Perhaps in the long run a more overarching focus in several disciplines on gender could be put together for those students who wish to explore these topics in more depth. Focusing on both the theoretical and the experiential is a key ingredient. The community college classroom is itself a synthesis of varying perspectives; it seems plausible to recognize that women's studies is no different.

February 1997

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# Innovations in Teaching

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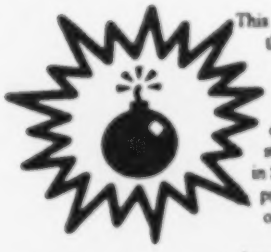
## An 'Awakening':

### Service Project Enlarges the Scope of Women in Literature

*by Lynne DeCicco*

*A basic life requirement should be to sit in on a few hours of domestic court. This has got to be one of the most informative, thought-provoking assignments ever given. Not only was it fascinating to watch people revealing intimate and private details of their lives, but it was disturbing to see the breakup of relationships, marriages, and families. People don't enter into a relationship thinking that they will end up in court. It's hard to imagine the couples observed in these cases ever courting, dating, or being in love. It's amazing what people become capable of when they are hurt by someone they love.*

*— Women in Literature student*



This observation crystallizes students' reflections in the aftermath of a service-learning project implemented in **Women in Literature** last Spring and continuing this semester. In the interest of promoting an educational synthesis of law, literature, and women's issues, I asked students to observe domestic violence hearings in Somerset County Superior Court, Family Part, proceedings which remain, interestingly enough, open to the public.

Approximately 25 students took part, taking down impressions of what they deemed significant from the standpoint of gender issues. They were asked to consider the kinds of topics we address that underscore or parallel those witnessed in court: gender roles; marital dynamics relating to power, sex, and/or, money; attitudes towards identity and growth.

The Judges, Thomas H. Dilts and Graham T. Rosa, Jr., whom I met with prior to student involvement, fully endorsed the assignment; when time permitted, both met with students after the hearings to explicate points of law or just answer questions related to what they had observed. Students were also provided with an overview of the court system in Somerset County and the laws governing domestic violence prior to their observations so that they would appreciate the legal underpinnings of their observations more completely.

The actual service component of the project involved writing observation papers submitted confidentially to the Women's Resource Center and their Families in Bound Brook. Joan Sulzman, Director of the Center, was most enthusiastic about this aspect of the project she termed it a "court watch" that helped the Center foster greater sensitivity and awareness for culturally-proscribed gender roles and how these can be subtly subverted or endorsed through the use of language, control, and/or authority in the courtroom.

An added feature was a visit by Judge Dilts to my class. Affably consenting to read *The Awakening*, a nineteenth-century novel highlighting psychological domestic turbulence in the wake of a woman's search for identity and purpose, the Judge commented on the laws governing women at the time the novel was written by Kate Chopin (1899), synthesizing the text's legal and social constraints with current law relating to domestic abuse and harassment. Students were enthralled - what a marvelous dialogue ensued as the class enlarged the scope of the novel, suggesting that the domestic assault practiced on the protagonist's Poetillier, is a nineteenth-century version of the same abuse still visited on women today.

(APPENDIX A)

What did *I* expect to emerge from all of this? I can say now that I was not sure what would occur, but I knew it was an interdisciplinary approach that was the right one for the course as I define it. One goal which stems in part from my own doctoral work was to demystify the law in order to encourage greater awareness for laws affecting women. The observations combined with student writing and the open dialogue with the Judge, succeeded in doing just that, but in ways I had not foreseen: students were impressed by the swiftness of the family court system (domestic violence hearings come up quickly, generally within a week of signing a complaint), by the relative ease and speed of determining credibility and rendering a fair sentence. People's lives can be severed so quickly, and lives are so fragile. Beyond this, they were amazed and appalled by the number of litigants who appear to undermine the legal process through obvious deceit, improper lawsuits, and lack of respect for the system overall.

Students also commented on the irony of being part of a triple layer of audiences within the theatre of the court - a variation, as one put it, on Plato's cave: there were the current litigants in the spotlight, there were other litigants waiting to go on, and there was the Judge, the appointed audience who listens and renders a decision; they came to see that while they were students on an assignment they also formed yet another audience, and often unconsciously assumed the role of second silent judge during the proceedings. I know because I was there a few times myself - I wanted to share in the experience too in order to witness what the students had encountered.

I also did not count on the ways the assignment itself made students consider the ramifications of their own lives: numerous students had already been volunteers, at local shelters and clinics, but the assignment induced many others to discover a service bond within their own communities: students became volunteers at the Resource Center and elsewhere; they served as Big Sisters, worked at Alcoholics Anonymous; they even saw themselves in a few of the litigants they observed. One young woman told me she realized she had been the victim of harassment for many years and had never understood or recognized she could change it, had it not been for this assignment.

Next semester, I plan to offer the newly-designed "Law and Literature," and I know some of the ideas generated from this project can be applied to this course as well. I plan to expand the legal themes in literature, from the trial as theatre (Sophocles' *Antigone*), to law as oppressive nightmare (Kafka's *The Trial.*) I would also like to explore attitudes towards jury involvement and selection as well as the language and role of a judge. Judge Dilts and Ross have expressed enthusiasm for pursuing these ideas next semester.

I conclude with a final comment by a student who expressed amazement that the relative affluence of Somerset County could support - nay, foster - such an outpouring of violence and abuse:

*I wasn't exactly shocked by what I heard in that courtroom, just surprised. After all, these people were well dressed, articulate self-employed business owners who came from a fairly affluent neighborhood. In addition, I assumed that the days when women were dependent on their husbands for financial as well as emotional support were long gone. However, I now realize that domestic violence can happen to anyone, anywhere. In addition, dependence and a fear of striking out on one's own lead many women to remain in unhealthy relationships. In other cases, a woman's only saving grace can be a fair and sympathetic legal system. Therefore, I was relieved and even felt a bit vindicated as a woman to see justice served. Perhaps if everyone took the time to visit his or her local court house, instead of watching the circus the media so often creates on television they would realize just how common violent attacks on women are.*[*]

[*] According to Joan Sulzman, in accordance with the most recent statistics published by the National Woman Abuse Prevention Center (Washington, D. C.), close to 96% of reported domestic assaults are perpetrated against women.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Women in Literature
Questions for Princeton study
Dr. Lynne DeCicco

1. Why did you take this course? Try to go beyond "because it fulfills a requirement" or "because it fit into my schedule." Given that the course content clearly focuses on women--issues, lives, values, aspirations--what made you decide to take it? Do you like it? Why?

2. Do you consider yourself a feminist? What, briefly, is your definition of a feminist? Have you felt comfortable in class if you are not a feminist? Please elaborate.

3. Would you prefer that the course have a different focus, perhaps even a different title? Is it important that the word "women" appear in the course title? Would you rather see the course entitled "Gender and Literature"? What, in your mind, is the difference?

4. Do you think dealing with issues relating to men still fits into this course, given that we tend to discuss men and women, or is the inclusion of men (i.e., male characters, male confinement, male authors) troublesome for you? Would you rather focus exclusively on women? What about other perspectives that need to be addressed--race, culture, class--can these still be a part of our discussion, or do they cloud the issue?

5. Perhaps this course needs to be broken down into two or more courses. If you think so, what would you want them to be?

(APPENDIX B)